

## By Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi

There came a command that a certain obscure and unknown individual, belonging to a small and almost forgotten town, should step forth into the ranks of the learned and accomplished, and narrate to the world the tale of his own life—indeed, a tale of exposure. And who was it that issued this command? A venerable elder—one who was noble in appearance, noble in character, and lofty in conduct. It is better, perhaps, for both elders and juniors to comply when such an order comes from a respected figure. So here I am, fulfilling the request at once. However, you gentlemen may kindly take this lightly. What will the world say of your refined taste in selection? That you have chosen such a person—and I, after all, am but one among these so-called eccentrics.

My eyes first opened in a distinctly religious household. My father (may Allah keep his grave cool) was a man who, despite holding a respectable government position, was deeply inclined towards scholars, and was himself a practicing and devout Muslim. My mother (may Allah grant her long life and blessings) was one who kept vigils at night and was devoted to prayer. This was towards the end of the nineteenth century. In our home, the tradition of Eastern education still prevailed to some extent.

I was placed under the tutelage of a Maulvi Sahib. Along with the recitation of the Qur'an (Nazirah), other subjects were also initiated. I studied the readers of the late Maulvi Muhammad Ismail Meeruthi with such delight that their sweetness remains vivid in my memory even today. My ability to write Urdu—however broken and imperfect it may have been—was laid during that very period.

In Persian, I went through works such as Gulistan, Bostan, Ruq'at, Yusuf Zulekha, and even Kimiya-e-Sa'adat. Most of these, I must admit, I completed rather hastily and with little real understanding. Later, I was admitted to a school where I began learning Arabic.

I was fortunate to find kind and affectionate teachers, and thus no fear or aversion towards Arabic ever developed in me. This, indeed, is the grace and influence of those noble elders.

It was still early childhood when an English-educated cousin awakened in me a passion for newspapers. My heart inclined towards independent reading. Whether it was a newspaper, a magazine, an advertisement, or a book—whatever printed material came before me, there was no chance of it escaping my attention.

Besides Urdu, I had acquired some familiarity with English, Persian, and Arabic as well. Thus, subjects like fiqh, tafsir, history, Sufism, logic, debate, literature, fiction, novels, drama, medicine, and poetry—all somehow came within its scope. A strong religious zeal was present. When I came across the polemical writings of the Aryas and Christians, it was as if a fire had been ignited within me. I began searching for answers; it became almost an obsession.

From that period remain memories of Maulana Sanaullah Amritsari's Tazkīr-e-Islām and similar works, Hakim Nuruddin's Nuruddin, and the monthly Tuhfa-e-Muhammadiyah edited by Maulana Muhammad Ali Mongeri, the Nazim of Nadwa. And yes, there is one name that almost slips from memory—why that poor man has fallen into obscurity is beyond me: Maulvi Ihsanullah Abbasi, advocate of Gorakhpur, author of Al-Islam and Tarikh al-Islam, and others.

With great enthusiasm and passion, I read all these books, and according to my capacity, I also wrote a little. In the literary field, it was the era dominated by the late Sharar and his contemporaries, such as Munshi Sajjad Husain, editor of Oudh Punch, and others. This period may be said to extend from 1903 to 1907.

In 1907, I came across Maqālāt-e-Shibli and Al-Kalām, and from that very moment, the spell of Maulana Shibli took hold of me. I began seeking his writings. I did not merely read him—I recited him. I had Al-Nadwa subscribed in the name of my late father. I would read old issues aloud, and count the days for the arrival of the new one. I would read every line of

Maulana's writings again and again; entire phrases became committed to memory, and his expressions settled upon my tongue.

I would go around telling my peers—indeed, even arguing with them—that Allama Shibli was the reviver (mujaddid) of the age. At the same time, my reverence for Nazir, Hali, Sir Syed, and Azad also remained firmly established.

In 1908, I was in my sixteenth year when, after passing the matriculation examination, I entered a college in Lucknow. There, I plunged into English books. By chance, at the very beginning, a book by a prominent English doctor came into my hands. The man openly, and in very forceful words, advocated materialism and rebelled against both religion and morality.

His argument was that chastity and moral conduct have no real meaning; they are merely baseless notions fabricated by the ancients. The real thing, according to him, is health and material comfort. One should take care of one's health and then do whatever one pleases. The restrictions of marriage and the like are all unnecessary. The author certainly did not have Islam specifically in mind, but the blow inevitably fell upon Islam as well. My thoughts began to waver.

Around the same time, I happened to come across another book. This one was literary, containing the sayings and ideas of great personalities of the world. In it, at one place, there was a full-page portrait of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. Beneath it was written, as a reference, that a manuscript image exists in a museum—perhaps in Rome—and that this was its photograph.

The depiction was such: a turban on the head, a cloak over the body, a sword tied at the waist, a quiver slung over the shoulder, and a bow in hand. The eyebrows were drawn tight, the eyes filled with anger, and the face reflecting harshness. The dignity of Rahmat-ul-lil-'Alamin was nowhere to be seen; even the signs of ordinary gentleness and good nature were absent. Beneath it was the reference—

For a mind already overawed by Western influence, what room was left now for doubt or hesitation?

The mind had already been paralyzed; now the heart too was wounded. Apostasy came quietly, on silent feet. Erasing Islam, erasing faith, it established itself in full control. My heart had already turned away from Aryanism, Christianity, and other religions. Now, openly, the rule of freedom and free thought was established.

The intoxication of atheism, the thrill of irreligion, grew in companionship with rationalism. A bond was formed with agnosticism. I accepted membership of the Rationalist Association of London, and my entire time began to be devoted to Hume, Mill, Spencer, Huxley, Hegel, Ingersoll, Bradlaugh, Büchner, Darwin, and the Greek philosophers, materialists, and naturalists.

I read Mill so much, so very much, that among the students I became known as “the memorizer of Mill.”

Around that time, another book, related to medicine—on mental physiology—by a well-known English doctor, came before my eyes. It discussed nervous and mental diseases. The wretched author had written, in the context of epilepsy, that in ancient times people used to take its symptoms as “divine revelation,” and that a person suffering from it may otherwise possess very strong intellectual faculties; he could bring about revolutions in the world, and could establish both religion and empire—and so on.

Whatever deficiency still remained in my apostasy, atheism, and aversion to Islam was now completed. When the time came to fill out the form for the F.A. examination, in the column for religion, instead of writing “Muslim,” I wrote “Rationalist.”

This phase of atheism, irreligion, and rationalism lasted for about eight to ten years. I completed F.A. and B.A.; the M.A. was not completed, but in any case, my education had been grounded in philosophy. Writing articles, as well as authoring and compiling works in both Urdu and English, continued.

Gradually, the year 1918 arrived. It was towards the end of the year that, at the urging of a friend, I read some books on Buddhism in English, and my heart inclined somewhat in that direction. Thereafter, I began the study of Hindu philosophy. Particularly through the English translations and writings of Mrs. Besant and the renowned philosopher of Banaras, Dr. Bhagwan Das, the sharp intoxication of Western materialism and rationalism that had overtaken me began to gradually subside.

The heart became convinced that beyond the material and sensory world, there must indeed exist another realm. An English edition of the Bhagavad Gita (translated by Besant) proved, in this regard, to be like an elixir. The name of God no longer seemed ridiculous. Words like soul and spirituality were no longer objects of aversion or disdain.

Yes, around the same time, the first volume of Maulana Shibli's Sirat al-Nabi had already been published. I had read it with great attention and had been deeply influenced by it. Faith in the prophethood of the subject of the biography was still far from me, but due to the earlier influence of Margoliouth and others, a false image (God forbid) of a cunning and bloodthirsty leader had formed in my mind. This rust was removed from my eyes through the blessing of studying this biography, and in its place emerged the image of a well-intentioned reformer of a people.

Now my heart also began to incline towards the sayings and states of Muslim Sufis. When accounts of spiritual unveiling and miracles were mentioned, it no longer happened that spontaneous laughter would arise; rather, there developed a desire to seek out such discourses and narrations. Many Persian and Urdu books in this field were read.

I was still not a Muslim, but the force of rebellion and aggression had now been broken.

In a discussion of beneficent books, the mention of beneficent personalities may perhaps seem out of place. Yet it is not possible to proceed without saying that, during this period, there were two or three living individuals from whom my nature, gradually and very slowly indeed, but nonetheless, continued to receive reformatory influence. One was the well-known Urdu hakim and witty poet Akbar Allahabadi. The other was the editor of Comrade, at that time "Mr." and later to become Maulana, Muhammad Ali Jauhar. After these two, a slight influence was also felt from Maulana Hamiduddin, the exegete of the Qur'an.

By the close of 1919, I happened to see, in the possession of a dear one, six large volumes of the Mathnavi Ma'navi (Kanpur edition). (May Allah shower His mercy upon the grave of Rahmatullah Ra'd.) They were adorned with all the outward excellences of paper, calligraphy, and printing, with very detailed marginal notes. A few years earlier, I would not even have paid attention to them, but now the ground had been fully prepared. The nourishment reached the system at the exact hour and minute it was needed.

I began the study with enthusiasm and eagerness, and at every step the pace of my passion grew faster and faster. Words are difficult to find to describe the intensity of this zeal. My proficiency in Persian was only elementary; the subtleties and mysteries of spiritual wayfaring and gnosis were another matter altogether. Even the apparent, literal meanings of hundreds, even thousands of verses did not come within my understanding, yet such was my absorption that I did not feel inclined to leave even a single verse. My heart longed, irresistibly, to consume all the volumes at once, in whatever way possible.

I lost awareness even of eating, drinking, and social interaction. The mind grew restless with the desire to shut myself in a room and continue reading it from beginning to end. Each verse pierced the heart like an arrow or a lancet, and one by one, the clouds of doubt, skepticism, rationalism, and agnosticism began to disperse. The scholarly tone of the marginal notes, however, did not appeal much to the heart.

Especially when the doctrines of Shaykh Ibn ‘Arabi came up, the mind would begin to feel entangled, for it seemed that these were once again ideas in the manner of Plato and others—ideas from which I had once fled. But wherever the brief, simple, yet profound marginal notes of Hazrat Haji Imdadullah Muhajir Makki appeared, the heart would stir with delight, and it would spontaneously bear witness that surely such words could only come from one who speaks the truth.

Maulana has said, regarding the Messenger (peace be upon him), that what need is there to bring any external proof through miracles or extraordinary events? Every single aspect of the Prophet is, in itself, a miracle:

“The face and the voice of the Prophet are themselves miracles.”

My own condition with regard to the Mathnavi was exactly the same. Every verse seemed to cry out on its own, testifying that it had issued from the tongue of one who speaks the truth; no further proof or argument was needed.

The study of the Mathnavi continued not for weeks, but for months without interruption. Throughout this entire period, a kind of intoxication remained upon me. Whether rising or sitting, sleeping or waking, walking or moving—my mind was absorbed in nothing but it. In such a state, had I died, it would not have been surprising if, when questioned in the grave by the angels, and asked about my religion, my tongue would have replied that my religion is the same as that of Maulana Rumi.

Faith in the Qur’an and in Prophethood had not yet become firm; the greatest proof, for me, was simply this—that if the author of the Mathnavi believed in it, then how could this religion not be true?

It was probably August 1920 when, at the house of a dear one, I came across the English translation of the Qur’an by Maulvi Muhammad Ali of Lahore. My heart received from it a deep and favorable impression. Many of the doubts and objections that had come through

Western thought were removed through this translation and commentary, and this opinion remains with me to this day.

Over the span of these twenty years, many shortcomings and errors of this translation and exegesis have come to light (indeed, in some places, such boldness as borders on distortion), yet there is still no doubt that, for those educated in English and influenced by the West, it is beneficial—indeed, highly beneficial. When, by the wisdom of Allah, even the words of non-Muslims can become a means of guidance, then this is, after all, a translation and commentary on the Word of Allah. To become entirely distrustful of the translator's effort on account of certain doctrinal errors is neither just nor in keeping with the demands of true inquiry.

After having become, as it were, half a Muslim, it was not much difficult to become a complete Muslim and to come fully under the command: "Enter into Islam completely." The Urdu and Persian poetry of Iqbal, the poems and writings of Muhammad Ali (especially those from the period of internment, 1921–23), all continued to perform their respective roles, gradually settling in the heart.

Until, finally, the Maktubat of the Mujaddid placed a complete seal upon it. The edition of the Maktubat that came before me, in several volumes, with its clarity, elegance, and abundance of marginal notes, was in its own way comparable to that Kanpur edition of the Mathnavi, and perhaps only slightly less in its effect. If the Mathnavi had created within the heart a kind of agitation and yearning, it was through the blessing of the Maktubat that calmness and stability were attained.

In between, countless works—both in prose and poetry—of great masters such as Attar, Sanai, Jami, Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani, Ghazali, Suhrawardi, and others passed before my eyes. Yet, the deepest imprint upon the heart remained of only two books: first the Mathnavi, and then the Maktubat. This, despite the fact that a large portion of both was not understood at that time—and, indeed, has not been fully understood even now.



Among the modern English books, one more noteworthy work comes to mind. It is by the European convert Leopold Weiss (Muhammad Asad), titled *Islam on the Crossroad*. Though small in appearance, it is vast and profound in meaning. It is worthy of being placed in the hands of every English reader. The great satisfaction in reading it was that the ideas I had already formed regarding Western civilization and Islam seemed to be fully affirmed by this Western thinker as well.

It was in 1927 that, through the guidance of a friend, I first gained access to the sermons and some treatises on spiritual discipline of Maulana Thanvi (may his blessings endure). Then, in 1928, I came into contact with the Maulana himself and his other writings. This opened before my sight an entirely new world of religious and spiritual truths.

For the past few years now, the constant occupation of this ignorant and unworthy one (Abdul Majid Daryabadi) has been service to the Qur'an. My own experience is that, in the works of others, even after turning page upon page, those profound insights are often not found which, in the writings of the exegete Thanvi, are obtained within just a few lines. The trial of contemporaneity is indeed a strange trial. May Allah protect everyone. Those who do not wish to see—how can their eyes be forced open to make them see?

And this is not confined merely to exegesis or the outward sciences. In the inward sciences, the rank perhaps proves even higher.

“O You whose countenance is the answer to every question,  
Through You, difficulties are resolved without dispute or argument.”

The number of beneficent books is so vast that, if all were to be described in detail, it would itself become a separate volume. In brief—rather, in the briefest terms—it may be said that, in Hadith, *Sahih al-Bukhari* and its commentary *Fath al-Bari* opened my eyes, and in jurisprudence, for the expansion of understanding, the sayings of the Hanafi imams proved entirely sufficient.

In understanding the Qur'an, the well-known and widely circulated commentaries were found to be helpful and beneficial. To belittle them is itself a sign of one's own deprivation. I mention these books with such ease as though I could read them fluently and with correct pronunciation, whereas this is not at all the case. With the support of dictionaries, commentaries, and translations, the work somehow manages to proceed.

In lexicons, I remain most attached to Taj al-'Arus and then Lisan al-'Arab, and in Qur'anic vocabulary, to Mufradat al-Qur'an. To mention the Book of Allah alongside human books, and to place them in comparison and contrast, is indeed a mark of poor taste. Moreover, the very use of the plural "books" in the phrase "beneficent books" itself indicates that the Book lies entirely outside this category.

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